

# Emotional resonance and language transfer: an analysis of the psychological mechanisms of musical theatre in the English classroom

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**Abstract.** As an integrated art form combining language, emotion, and performance, musical theatre has increasingly attracted attention in English language teaching in recent years. Drawing upon educational psychology and language transfer theory, this paper explores the psychological mechanisms through which musical theatre stimulates students' emotional resonance and facilitates language transfer in the English classroom, based on literature review and case analysis. The study finds that musical theatre, through multimodal input and contextualized expression, contributes to improving the quality of language input and expressive ability, thereby enhancing learning motivation. The paper proposes corresponding teaching strategies, aiming to provide both theoretical support and practical reference for the application of musical theatre in English instruction.

**Keywords:** musical theatre, English language teaching, emotional resonance, language transfer, educational psychology

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## 1. Introduction

As educational philosophy shifts from “knowledge transmission” to “competency development,” researchers have increasingly turned their attention to the role of learners’ emotional experiences in the learning process. Musical theatre offers an emotionally rich and artistically engaging learning environment, transforming language learning from an abstract and tedious memorization task into a dynamic and expressive practice. Against the backdrop of the new curriculum standards that emphasize students’ comprehensive language proficiency, the emotional appeal, aesthetic experience, and practical linguistic functions of musical theatre have become increasingly prominent, offering new perspectives for English language instruction.

Furthermore, the introduction of musical theatre signifies a return to a cultural and educational philosophy—namely, that language, as an integral part of culture, should be taught within contextual, emotional, and humanistic frameworks. As curriculum integration and interdisciplinary teaching become prevailing trends in contemporary education, the multidimensional nature of musical theatre enables it to serve not only language acquisition but also cultural transmission and character development, thereby playing a distinctive role in secondary school English classrooms.

More importantly, the English language conveyed through musical theatre is not merely a tool but also a carrier of cultural meaning. In the process of learning lines and lyrics, students are also continuously absorbing historical and cultural knowledge of English-speaking countries. This immersive approach to cultural learning is often difficult to achieve in traditional teaching settings, whereas musical theatre, through its artistic and contextual nature, effectively compensates for this limitation.

Against the backdrop of globalization and increasing multicultural integration, language learning is no longer confined to cognitive aspects such as grammar and vocabulary; emotional factors and psychological mechanisms are playing an increasingly prominent role in instruction. As a multimodal art form integrating performance, music, language, and movement, musical theatre has drawn growing attention from educators for its application in English classrooms. The situational atmosphere created by musical theatre often engages students’ sensory experiences and emotional participation, thereby stimulating their interest in language learning, enhancing the effectiveness of language input, and facilitating language transfer. In recent years, with the in-depth implementation of the “core competencies” framework, interdisciplinary, integrative teaching models have gained momentum. Musical theatre serves as a quintessential integrative medium, capable of overcoming the isolation and mechanical rigidity of traditional language instruction, and promoting the holistic development of linguistic knowledge, cultural awareness, and emotional attitudes.

## 2. The psychological mechanisms by which musical theatre evokes emotional resonance

From a neuroscience perspective, the activation of mirror neurons enables audiences to automatically generate emotional experiences similar to those of the characters they observe in theatrical performances—a mechanism known as “emotional empathy.” In musical theatre instruction, when students take on roles and immerse themselves in specific contexts, their emotional neural systems are activated, thereby establishing a deep psychological connection with language expression. This immersive mode of language experience helps to overcome the common dilemma in language learning characterized by “low engagement and high cognitive load.”

Emotional resonance is widely recognized in educational psychology as a key factor influencing learning motivation and memory formation. Musical theatre inherently incorporates emotional elements such as dramatic conflict, emotional expression, and role switching, which can stimulate students’ psychological projection and emotional engagement, thereby enhancing the processing and storage of linguistic information. For example, Han Xi pointed out in her study of the “AIDS play” that theatrical language creates a strong tension between the expression of disease and emotion, eliciting profound psychological responses from the audience [1]. This language expression centered on “emotional arousal” is equally applicable to the emotional mobilization of students in the teaching context. Huang Shan, in research on the adaptation of *Matilda*, proposed that musical theatre guides the audience toward emotional isomorphism through multidimensional portrayals of characters’ inner worlds [2]. This isomorphic mechanism can be transformed into the basis for emotional investment in teaching, providing intrinsic motivation for language transfer. Therefore, musical theatre instruction should not merely focus on the transmission of linguistic content but should guide students to “enter into the play,” allowing emotion and context to jointly participate in cognitive construction.

In the practical teaching process, teachers can utilize the emotional climaxes in musical theatre to establish “emotional turning points,” guiding students to engage in emotional imagination and language retelling exercises. For example, when performing a segment from *Les Misérables*, students can be led to perceive the character’s psychological journey through Jean Valjean’s emotional transformation and attempt to express the character’s inner monologue in English, thereby achieving synchronous development of language proficiency and emotional understanding.

The “motivation–behavior–feedback” model in educational psychology also provides theoretical support for understanding musical theatre instruction. During their participation in musical theatre learning, students’ motivation is driven not only by external instructional goals but also by the self-worth experiences gained through situational engagement. This positive feedback can stimulate sustained enthusiasm for learning and further consolidate language content through emotional memory, thereby forming long-term transfer effects.

Regarding student engagement, research shows that musical theatre instruction more effectively mobilizes students’ positive emotions compared to conventional teaching methods. Especially during adolescence, students’ desire for expression and sense of role identification are more readily released on stage. This externalization of emotion and internalization of language often occur simultaneously, thereby forming stronger memory traces and expressive pathways.

## 3. The advantages of language input in musical theatre from the perspective of language transfer theory

Moreover, musical theatre texts possess unique linguistic features such as rhyme, rhythm, and strong repetition, which enhance students’ language sensitivity and sentence pattern retention. Research indicates that through repeated rehearsals and performances, students unconsciously transfer the typical expressions found in the lyrics into their spoken and written language, achieving a “native-like transformation” in language output. More importantly, this form of “emotionally infused language transfer” is far more sustainable and effective than mechanical drills.

Language transfer is one of the core concepts in second language acquisition research, emphasizing learners’ ability to transfer previously acquired linguistic knowledge from one context to another. In English teaching, traditional approaches often focus on repetitive drills of vocabulary and grammar but overlook the crucial role of context and emotional motivation in language transfer. Musical theatre teaching provides a multimodal platform integrating context, emotion, and phonetics. He Qi pointed out that the synergy between the rhythm of musical theatre and phonetic elements helps students engage in phonetic imitation training within an enjoyable atmosphere, thereby enhancing their phonetic transfer ability [3]. Zhang Kaihua further emphasized that high-frequency vocabulary and fixed sentence patterns in musical theatre are reinforced through repeated singing, enabling students to internalize language structures naturally during performance and transfer them to authentic communicative situations [4]. This indicates that musical theatre is not only a “carrier” of language input but also a “catalyst” for language transfer, transforming linguistic knowledge from textbooks into expressive tools through emotionally rich performances.

It is worth noting that the language used in musical theatre often carries distinct pragmatic intentions, and this contextualized expression significantly facilitates students’ language transfer ability. Compared with traditional grammar explanations, situational singing more naturally presents variations in tone, intonation, and sentence structure, enabling students to develop an

automatic language-use pattern through the integrated practice of “speaking–acting–singing,” thereby enhancing their confidence and ability in language transfer.

Language transfer not only involves the reuse of vocabulary and sentence patterns across different contexts but also encompasses the transfer of pragmatic awareness, communicative strategies, and cultural background knowledge. The linguistic styles and social settings embodied by different characters in musical theatre inherently contain rich pragmatic information. Through imitation and performance, students implicitly learn how to adjust their language style according to the audience, context, and emotions, thereby enhancing their flexibility and expressiveness in authentic communication. This transfer effect is especially pronounced in oral communication instruction.

The essence of language transfer lies in the effective linkage between “comprehensible input” and “expressive output.” The character dialogues, monologues, and plot narratives in musical theatre provide students with templates for flexible application of language structures in authentic contexts. Through repeated rehearsal and retelling, students move beyond rote memorization and gradually build an integrated communicative competence structure of “listening–speaking–performing.”

#### **4. Case applications and strategy analysis in teaching practice**

In addition to practical cases in secondary and tertiary education, some primary school English teachers have also begun experimenting with simplified versions of musical theatre in the classroom. For example, classic segments from English animated films such as *The Lion King* and *Frozen* have been adapted into performance tasks, which not only stimulate students’ interest in language but also, to some extent, enhance class cohesion. Research shows that primary school students are more sensitive to language input with musical rhythm and plot-driven content; therefore, introducing musical theatre during the early stages of language acquisition helps establish a positive learning attitude and an initial awareness of language transfer.

Integrating musical theatre into actual classroom teaching requires careful consideration of teaching objectives, student characteristics, and the integration of curriculum resources. Yan Anqi’s development of a high school English school-based curriculum case based on *My Fair Lady* demonstrates that through phased instructional design, students can achieve synergistic improvements in language proficiency, literary understanding, and aesthetic experience through role-playing and interdisciplinary tasks [5]. She designed a complete teaching pathway in the curriculum consisting of “script intensive reading – language reconstruction – role performance – theatre presentation,” effectively promoting the simultaneous development of students’ language expression skills and overall competence. In higher education, Cheng Yanlin studied the practical implementation of the musical *Hamilton* in college English classrooms. By setting up modules such as intercultural understanding, group collaborative analysis, and stage performance rehearsal, she guided students to conduct multi-faceted analyses ranging from historical background and pragmatic strategies to language expression [6]. These cases illustrate that in curriculum design, teachers can deeply embed musical theatre instruction into language knowledge teaching and emotional education through methods such as “micro-theatre” teaching, “task-based learning,” and “reflective writing,” thereby maximizing language transfer.

At the curriculum design level, teachers can refer to an integrated approach combining “flipped classroom” and “project-based learning,” assigning musical theatre segment study tasks as pre-class preparation, while using classroom time for role rehearsal, emotional comprehension, and language transfer training, thereby enhancing teaching efficiency and student engagement. Particularly for intermediate-level students, tiered and progressive script assignments and task refinement help accommodate individual differences while advancing overall progress.

In terms of teaching organization, the “student director system” can also be introduced, where students take turns serving as group directors to independently assign roles, coordinate performances, and provide linguistic and emotional feedback on the acting. This role rotation not only enhances students’ sense of responsibility and organizational skills but also promotes their ability to evaluate language expression from multiple perspectives, serving as an important extension of teaching interaction.

#### **5. Existing problems and suggestions for improvement**

Moreover, the effective implementation of musical theatre teaching is also constrained by curriculum evaluation mechanisms. In environments with high exam pressure, teachers tend to prefer “efficient score-boosting” teaching methods and are reluctant to invest substantial time in rehearsals and organization. Therefore, it is necessary to guide schools at the policy level to establish more scientific teaching evaluation systems, incorporating students’ language practice abilities, emotional involvement, and cooperative performance into diversified assessment criteria, so as to promote the normalization and sustainable development of musical theatre teaching.

Although musical theatre holds rich educational potential in English teaching, it still faces numerous practical challenges in its promotion. First, musical theatre itself has a relatively high artistic threshold, and some teachers lack the relevant background in music and drama, leading to a sense of apprehension during instructional implementation. Second, musical theatre teaching requires substantial class time and rehearsal space, which are often difficult to allocate systematically in secondary English education due to scheduling constraints and exam pressures. Third, some students exhibit low initial participation, especially

introverted individuals or those with weak English foundations, who may experience anxiety when confronted with the “stage performance” format, thereby affecting teaching outcomes. Additionally, the selection of musical theatre resources and their compatibility with the local teaching environment also impact effectiveness. In response to these issues, this paper proposes the following optimization suggestions: (1) strengthen teacher training by encouraging English teachers to participate in drama teaching workshops or interdisciplinary research activities to enhance their theatrical literacy; (2) adopt a “micro-theatre” strategy in teaching arrangements, integrating musical theatre elements into regular instruction in a fragmented and modular manner; (3) emphasize individual differences among students by providing diversified participation options, such as backstage planning, script editing, lighting, and sound tasks to stimulate multifaceted involvement; and (4) establish cooperation mechanisms between schools and community arts organizations to introduce professional resources that support the implementation of musical theatre teaching.

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From a management perspective, educational administrative departments can establish special research projects or funding programs to support schools in conducting “innovative English musical theatre teaching” studies, providing frontline teachers with platforms for teaching research and mechanisms for research-to-practice translation. At the same time, they can promote the establishment of an integrated “internship–guidance–research” collaborative mechanism between teacher training institutions and primary and secondary schools. Through the combination of university experts’ guidance and classroom practice, a regionally distinctive musical theatre teaching model can be gradually developed. In addition, textbook publishing organizations can develop supplementary readers and leveled scripts adapted for musical theatre teaching, alleviating the pressure of material scarcity faced by frontline teachers.

In terms of resource allocation, it is recommended that educational authorities establish high-quality English musical theatre teaching resource repositories through digital platforms. These repositories should include leveled scripts, performance videos, teaching design templates, and platforms for showcasing works by teachers and students, thereby providing replicable and scalable quality cases for schools in different regions and effectively alleviating regional disparities in educational resources.

Furthermore, updating teachers’ instructional beliefs is a key factor in promoting musical theatre teaching. Some teachers still hold the view that “English teaching should be exam-oriented,” making it difficult for them to accept the integration of artistic content into language classrooms. Therefore, teacher training should emphasize theoretical guidance on the value of musical theatre teaching and showcase practical case studies to enhance teachers’ acceptance and initiative, fundamentally promoting the sustainable development of instructional reform.

## 6. Conclusion

As an instructional medium that integrates linguistic art, emotional expression, and cultural transmission, musical theatre injects vibrant vitality into the English classroom. By eliciting students’ emotional resonance, enhancing the authenticity of language contexts, and driving expressive motivation, it promotes the transfer and application of language knowledge, highlighting its unique psychological mechanisms and educational value. Starting from the perspective of emotional psychology, this paper explores how musical theatre realizes the teaching approach of “promoting learning through emotion and facilitating transfer through context” in English education, and analyzes its operational strategies and practical challenges through case studies. Under the new curriculum standards advocating a “core competencies” orientation and a “holistic education” philosophy, musical theatre teaching, as a platform integrating language education and humanistic education, holds promising prospects for sustainable development. Future research may further expand the adaptation mechanisms of musical theatre across different educational stages and cultural contexts, and explore new forms of digital musical theatre instruction by incorporating AI and multimodal technologies.

In summary, musical theatre is not only a teaching tool but also a form of cultural experience and psychological regulation. It integrates language input with emotional motivation, cultural understanding with interdisciplinary integration, constructing a student-centered language learning ecosystem. In the future, teachers and researchers should pay greater attention to the educational psychological foundations and instructional conditions underlying musical theatre, and, in light of contemporary developments and technological means, explore musical theatre teaching paradigms suited to Chinese students, thereby truly realizing the humanization and artistic enrichment of language teaching.

With the continuous development of technologies such as artificial intelligence and virtual reality, musical theatre teaching also faces new opportunities and challenges. The integration of virtual stages, AI-generated characters, and speech recognition technologies is transforming traditional classroom teaching models, making “immersive language learning” possible. In the future, English teaching could leverage digital tools to highly replicate musical theatre scenes in virtual environments, enabling

various forms of language interaction such as “online rehearsals,” “remote choruses,” and “speech scoring,” thereby further expanding the scope and depth of musical theatre instruction.

In summary, musical theatre not only breaks the monotony and instrumentality of language teaching but also demonstrates unique value in emotional stimulation, language transfer, cultural understanding, and aesthetic education. How to better integrate musical theatre deeply into English teaching will become a key focus for future teacher training, curriculum reform, and academic research. Educational administrators may also consider incorporating musical theatre instruction into in-service teacher training systems, providing institutional support from the top-down to promote its widespread adoption in classrooms.

Future research can further explore the intrinsic mechanisms and external effects of musical theatre teaching from dimensions such as students’ emotional trajectories, in-depth evaluation of language transfer, and interdisciplinary integration models. Systematic validation can be conducted through data analysis, interview feedback, and classroom observations, thereby providing a more solid empirical foundation for musical theatre instruction.

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